
Black Lives Matter: The History and Existence of Racial Inequality in the United States

“Hands up. Don’t shoot.” This is a refrain shouted by #BlackLivesMatter activists throughout the United States. #BlackLivesMatter is a movement that gained national momentum in 2014 after acts of police brutality resulting in the death of black Americans such as Mike Brown and Eric Garner. In both of these cases, the respective police officers involved were not indicted for the death of American citizens. This prompted the reaction: “black lives matter”; the livelihood of black people should and must be as important as that of white people.

Throughout history, people of African descent in the United States have not equally enjoyed the same life and opportunities as other Americans due to racism, defined by public health scholars Jennifer Jee-Lyn Garcia and Mienah Zulfacar Sharif as “system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based on race, that unfairly disadvantages some individuals and communities, and advantages others.” In the early 1900s, multiple doctors brought attention to the disparity in the morbidity and mortality of diseases, many that result from poor living conditions, between black and white Americans. Lawrence Lee, a doctor writing in 1914, noted “that tuberculosis and other respiratory diseases and still-births cause a death-rate of 917.9 per 100,000 against a rate of 354.7 for whites.” In 1927, a movement in favor of eugenics took hold, beginning with the *Buck v. Bell* ruling. This United States Supreme Court case gave doctors the authority to designate certain people more fit to breed than others and supported the procreation of the so-called “fit” and limited that of the “unfit” through means such as forced sterilization. During this time, forty percent of the “unfit” people sterilized were non-white. However, #BlackLivesMatter activists demonstrate that racist agendas that are viewed as history in truth has ongoing effects to this day that negatively impact the daily lives and public health of African Americans. Opponents use the social media hashtag #AllLivesMatter, expressing the view that all people deserve equal rights and access to basic necessities, regardless of race. #AllLivesMatter is distinct from the #BlackLivesMatter movement in that it does not acknowledge the past and present inequity in the quality of life between white Americans and those of African descent. #BlackLivesMatter has given voice to a historically oppressed class of people and opened a discussion on how the eugenics movement has compromised that of black Americans and how this can be corrected and how future racially-charged infractions can be prevented.

The racialization of medicine has a significant role in the development of the eugenics movement. Garcia and Sharif define racism as “system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based on race, that unfairly disadvantages some individuals and communities” and claim that “racism as a social condition is a fundamental cause of health and illness.” The eugenics movement is one that is founded in racist ideology that was detrimental to the African American community. Negative eugenics was carried out through marriage restriction, forced sterilization, and confining the “feeble-minded” to colonies. The restriction of marriage through issuing marriage licenses was critical in the racist agenda of eugenics. It was illegal to have children outside of wedlock. Virginia in particular banned inter-racial marriage. By doing so, Virginia politicians and eugenicists were intentionally preventing people from having mixed race children, something they saw as undesirable. #AllLivesMatter activists would argue that the eugenics movement was not focused on African Americans, as many of the victims of eugenics were white. In *Buck v. Bell*, a case heard by the United States Supreme Court that secured

eugenic doctors' ability to forcibly sterilize the feeble-minded, the defendant was Carrie Buck, a white woman. Proponents of #AllLivesMatter would note that eugenic doctors instead targeted individuals of lower socio-economic status. Some of the diagnostic criteria for detecting feeble-mindedness included "cold and clammy hands and excessive pallor or blushing." While many of the victims of the application of negative eugenics were of lower socio-economic status, it cannot be ignored that the eugenics movement grew from calls to improve black public health in the early 1900's. Advancements in germ theory allowed for doctors to understand that diseases are transmissible regardless of race; as a result, doctors emphasized the need for sanitary living conditions for black Americans.

Historian Andrea Patterson claims that "public health measures were hijacked by eugenicists" – rather than these public health measures benefitting blacks, they, in part, created an environment in which eugenicists had reason to believe that people of particular racial background were predisposed to certain illnesses. Although *Buck v. Bell* enabled the eugenics movement to impact people of all races, the racist political regimes that preceded it supported the development of eugenics.

Paternalism was a major contributing factor for eugenics' establishment. In 1915, Doctor L. C. Allen posited that "the negro health problem is one of the "white man's burdens," and it is by no means the least of those burdens." It was his belief that the disproportionately high morbidity and mortality rates of diseases such as tuberculosis and syphilis among black Americans were the responsibility of the white population to resolve. Allen credited the strict supervision of slave owners over black slaves for the lack of illnesses related to an unclean living environment and sexually transmitted diseases while slavery was legal.

According to Allen, "freedom has not benefited his health, nor improved his morals," where "he" refers to African Americans. Without white slave owners to ensure that African Americans bathe, clean their living spaces, and do not engage in promiscuous sex, Allen claims that African Americans did not properly take care of themselves. His answer for this perceived problem is for white Americans to champion a public health reform by way of changing the educational curriculum for blacks. Allen's proposed "industrial education" would consist of teaching African American children proper hygiene and cater to their future career prospects, which mainly consist of service or manual labor roles. By singling out a minority group to be segregated for the purpose of a different education based on race, Allen's "industrial education" plan would have been an institutionalized instance of structural racism. Black Americans would have been denied access to an equal education, and by virtue of that, they would be further limited to the jobs available to them. Although this plan did not come to fruition, the ideas behind it lingered. Eugenic doctors felt that it was for the betterment of all humankind to promote the procreation of those with what these doctors deemed desirable traits while simultaneously diminishing or altogether ceasing the procreation of the "unfit." The widespread belief that eugenics existed in order to improve the global gene pool is paternalistic. The socio-economic elite utilized their position of power to further their self-interested ideology at the expense of those below them, particularly African Americans.

Mass incarceration of African Americans is a modern practice that in many ways is a continuation of eugenics. Victims of eugenic sterilization told their stories in a 2011 testimony in North Carolina arranged by The Governor's Task Force to Determine the Method of Compensation for Victims of North Carolina's Eugenics Board. One such victim was Elaine Riddick, a black woman. Her son, Tony Riddick commented on the ongoing systemic racism in

the United States, saying, “A young man nineteen years old, first time convicted, nonviolent offense, you give him fifteen to twenty years in prison. Now look at what happens, now he can no longer be a father, his mother loses a child.”

Though the testimony took place a few years before the #BlackLivesMatter movement gained momentum, these sentiments are the same as those felt by activists today. #BlackLivesMatter advocate and doctor Mary Basset argues in “#BlackLivesMatter — A Challenge to the Medical and Public Health Communities” that “there is great injustice in the daily violence experienced by young black men. But the tragedy of lives cut short is not accounted for entirely, or even mostly, by violence.” Indeed, as Tony Riddick pointed out, systemic racism has cost many black Americans the ability to lead a productive life in society and often the ability to reproduce. In the mid-twentieth century, this took the form of the eugenics movement. People designated “feebleminded,” a categorization for the so-called unfit of society, were often sent to colonies to live out their lives and forcibly sterilized. Though eugenics has been abolished, similar practices occur today. When a person is sentenced to a prison sentence that spans their prime reproductive years, they are segregated from the rest of society and are much less likely to raise a family. Tony Riddick drew a comparison between eugenics and mass incarceration, likening each to genocide. Flaws in today’s criminal justice system have allowed a form of racial genocide to perpetuate in the United States.

A quick internet search of the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter will bring up a sizable list of names that activists for the movement mourn as preventable deaths. Though many people know of Tamir Rice, Eric Garner, and Mike Brown, lesser known but equally important people are added to the list of casualties regularly. One such person is Joyce Curnell, a fifty year old black woman who died in jail on July 22, 2015. Curnell was arrested for failing to pay court fines, a minor offense. Curnell experienced severe nausea and vomiting and was not granted medical treatment or water. She passed away one day later from dehydration. These people, every black person who has lost their life early from preventable causes, represent a public health epidemic. Structural racism has decreased the life expectancy of black people living in the United States. As Garcia and Sharif argue, it is necessary to “reshape our discourse” and consider racism a public health issue in order to begin to combat its effects. It is vital that positive change happens for the betterment of our fellow Americans. This process begins with recognizing that racism exists and that #BlackLivesMatter.